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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002165

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SUBJECT: RELEASED MP MA'AMOUN HOMSI SAYS REGIME
UNREFORMABLE, CALLS FOR MORE U.S. PRESSURE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Former MP Ma'amoun Homsy, released with his colleague Riad Seif in January after five years imprisonment, told PolChief in early May that the SARG has continued to periodically harass him and threaten his family to bully him into lowering his public profile. Homsy criticized the international community for accepting the regime and giving it legitimacy, saying that this posture discouraged ordinary Syrians, who viewed the regime as blocking Syria's future development. He described the Syrian regime as completely unreformable and lacking any public support. Homsy also asserted that it encourages religious extremism in Syria and foments regional instability as tools to keep itself in power. While not nearly as impressive a political figure as Seif, and tarnished a bit by his former reputation as a shady businessman, Homsy is presenting himself as an opposition figure and has established a political alliance with influential behind-the-scenes political player Ihsan Sankar. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ma'amoun Homsy, the former Sunni MP imprisoned in 2001 (with Riad Seif and others during the Damascus Spring crackdown) and released in January 2006, told Polchief in early May that since his release the Syrian regime has harassed him periodically. On two occasions the security services detained him again, once entering his house late at night to seize him, badly frightening his family. That incident occurred just days after his release from prison and was a sign of regime discomfort at "all the visitors" he was receiving. He was arrested the second time about two months ago and "slapped around and insulted" by officers in the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), including its head Ali Mamluk, who threatened to bring in Homsy's family for similar treatment if he did not lower his profile. Homsy assessed that his relations with the regime "are calmer now."

¶3. (C) REGIME UNREFORMABLE: Offering his assessment of the Syrian regime, Homsy called it "completely unreformable." In his view, expecting it to implement any political or economic reform is "like asking Osama Bin Ladin to reform." Homsy termed corruption as critical to the stability of the regime, calling it "the regime's oxygen." He described the regime as "strong, if protected by the international community," but otherwise weak and lacking in internal support. Pointing to its recent exploitation of Islam to shore up support for the regime, Homsy called this a sign of weakness, likening it to Saddam Hussein's similar flirtation with Islam near the end of his rule.

14. (C) SYRIA MORE SECULAR THAN COMMONLY BELIEVED: While playing this Islam card at home, the regime also manipulates the international community into believing that Syria is a potential hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism, with only the regime standing as the last bulwark against it. This view, while widely held in the region and elsewhere, is false, according to Homsy. Echoing a range of other contacts who have separately made the same point, Homsy described Syrian society as Islamic in many ways, but also with strong secular characteristics and traditions. The regime, however, to keep itself in power, incubates religious extremism in Syria, as well as anti-Americanism, and helps cultivate instability in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon, Homsy added.

15. (C) REGIME SEEN AS BLOCKING SYRIA'S FUTURE: In his view, Syrians are pessimistic about their future and discouraged by the international community's acceptance of the Syrian regime. Most Syrians view the regime as blocking the future development of the country, he insisted. Homsy noted that he did not like U.S. public statements that referred to "regime behavior change," saying that they are understood in Syria as meaning that the U.S. wants the Asad regime to stay in power.

16. (C) Polchief met Homsy at the office of Sunni businessman and former MP Ihsan Sankar, a behind-the-scenes critic of the regime. The two have started being seen in public together, visiting families, attending private social gatherings and celebrations, but keeping their appearances as low-key as possible. Like other contacts, Sankar -- before Homsy arrived -- described him as a populist figure, with much more widespread "street support" than his more well-known colleague Riad Seif. (Comment: We find this a debatable

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assertion, but difficult to disprove at this point, given the authoritarian nature of the regime, which allows for no legitimate expressions of popular support.) Sankar also echoed others in referring candidly to Homsy's shady past involvement in business corruption, even mentioning his dealings with Rifa'at al-Asad and some past association with the President's deceased brother, Basil al-Asad.

17. (C) COMMENT: Despite Homsy's background, Sankar, a generally reliable contact whose political judgment seems solid, referred to Homsy as a useful figure, and has obviously established some sort of politically symbiotic alliance with him. Our own assessment is somewhat more jaundiced. Homsy did not seem to be nearly as impressive a political figure as Riad Seif, coming across as less articulate and persuasive than his former MP colleague. Seif's own assessment -- that he liked Homsy personally and appreciated the friendship they developed during five years of imprisonment, but that he did not want to associate with him politically -- seems an astute assessment. In the end, however, the Syrian opposition is so weak that it cannot be very choosy about its friends. For now, Homsy is acting like an opposition figure and putting his welfare on the line, qualifying him for association with like-minded individuals.

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